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Building a nexus between policing and care

The case of Flying Squads in Amsterdam

Ronald van Steden

Dutch policies concerning 'integral' (or 'integrated') safety – involving all sorts of welfare and criminal justice organizations into the management of public order (cf. Boutellier, 2001) – are fraught with contradictions and ambiguities. We are witnessing a strong emphasis on the local delivery of community policing and, more broadly, community safety programs that combine welfare ('care') and criminal justice ('policing') policies. As a result, municipalities in the Netherlands are seeking a prominent role in the local governance of welfare and security, as they are increasingly held responsible for carrying out integral safety programs.

This chapter aims at an understanding of the complex dynamics of integral community safety policies. In the following pages, I focus on the case of so-called 'Flying Squads' (*Vliegende Brigades*), previously piloted in Amsterdam, the capital city of the Netherlands. These squads, which play an intermediate role in integral safety, combine policing and welfare sector responsibilities for diminishing or solving 'minor' offences such as littering, loitering, and public drunkenness in the urban public domain. My findings are based on evaluative fieldwork carried out between July and October 2010 in Amsterdam. Although the empirical data are somewhat dated (the pilot has further developed over the years), lessons can still be drawn about the initial implementation of the Flying Squads.

Community safety programs, such as the Flying Squads, typically promise experimental action characterized by a novel sense of togetherness. At the very least, the bringing together of divergent welfare and criminal justice rationalities assumes 'spontaneity and creative freedom' (Boutellier 2013: 158) as drivers of institutional change. However, in studying how Flying Squads have been implemented, this chapter highlights an overemphasis on a 'top-down' approach that hampers the agility and liveliness required for local security governance to run smoothly.

In presenting my argument, I first address changes in Dutch community policing in relation to the widening web of integral safety programs. This change displays tendencies resonant with the growing prominence of initiatives such as the Flying Squads around the country. I then focus on the squads employed by the city of Amsterdam. Flying Squads illustrate an empirical expression of emerging social ordering practices within highly complex and volatile circumstances. After describing the phased approach of the Flying Squads, I present detailed information on how the teams function. Findings from this evaluation are placed within the context of the wider literature on local policing and community safety in the Netherlands and abroad.

Integral safety programs

From the 1960s onwards, the Netherlands has been famous for her pragmatic and friendly style of criminal justice (see Downes, 1998), in which the police have been a key actor. However, over the course of the 1980s, the Dutch government began to realize that their capacity and resources for public safety were limited when it came to forestalling crime and disorder problems. In particular, 'minor' offences, such as vandalism, shoplifting, burglary and youth problems were thorns in the flesh of politicians and citizens alike. The 1985 White Paper *Society and Crime (Samenleving en Criminaliteit)* provided the initial impetus for opening up a range of state (e.g., municipal) and non-state (e.g., schools, families) actors, which could be involved in policing and crime prevention strategies, including functional surveillance and improved social control. The Dutch police forces thereby became part of wider networks of organizations and (groups of) citizens responsible for the prevention of local crime and disorder.

In 1992, this 'responsibilization' (Garland, 1996) of 'third parties' (Buerger & Mazerolle, 1998) was further confirmed when the national government promoted the concept of 'integral safety', acknowledging the interdependence of local state authorities and civil society, and the reality that multiple and private, notably commercial, organizations had entered the arena. The arrival of responsibilization policies in Dutch public safety increasingly presented policing as a 'pluralized' function (Jones & Newburn, 2006) performed by city wardens (*stadswachten*), private security guards, and street coaches flanking the blue-collared state police. It may even be argued that the police have simply become one player amongst others, albeit an important one, in the local governance of welfare and security (Johnston & Shearing, 2003). This 'desacralization' (Reiner, 1992) of their former status, which was more or less a monopoly, is not necessarily a cause for regret among Dutch police officers. Quite the contrary: the concept of integral safety presents them with opportunities to partner with local networks, whose knowledge, capabilities and skills could contribute greatly to the police's own scarce resources.

The widening web of integral safety programs can be interpreted as a form of public craftsmanship, in the sense that finding solutions for local problems has created a whole raft of improvising initiatives and professionals. These professionals, however, are not restricted to police and police-type practitioners, such as private security guards and municipal law enforcers. Education, housing, youth care, the health service, and various other welfare organizations have also come to realize that the demand for local safety is increasingly relevant to their type of work. These organizations' core tasks are to assist and aid people, correct deviancy, and settle such conflicts as may emerge. They form a second 'defensive line' in integral safety programs; one that offers resounding support to the police and other

risk-managing institutions at the front-end of public order maintenance (Boutellier & Van Steden, 2011). Ideally, institutions such as schools, youth care, and housing associations are capable of stopping crime and disorder before coercive measures need to be adopted.

At the same time as integral safety policies are 'going local', public policing in the Netherlands is being propelled in the opposite direction. On 1 January 2013, the Dutch police took a step towards centralization, integrating the former 25 police regions into a single national force. For the first time in Dutch history the police are now responsible to one clear master, the Minister of Safety and Justice (*Minister van Veiligheid en Justitie*). Furthermore, and contradicting a long-standing culture of tolerance (*gedogen*), this trend to centralization reflects political pressures which are moving the Dutch police in a more firmly repressive direction. Peripheral public safety tasks such as controlling urban nuisance and deterioration are currently being redistributed to municipal or commercial professionals, while the police themselves devote higher priority to crime fighting and zero-tolerance approaches.

The 1990s and 2000s witnessed a trend towards lower tolerance levels, implying that anti-social behavior such as begging and public drunkenness, and young or homeless people congregating and causing annoyance in public spaces would all be liable to criminal prosecution (Downes & Van Swaaningen, 2007). Within this context, municipalities have sought to professionalize city wardens, transforming them into municipal law enforcement officers (*gemeentelijke handhavers*) holding limited police powers. They are now regarded as 'special investigative officers' (*buitengewoon opsporingsambtenaren*) who accompany police constables around the neighborhoods and city centers (Van Steden 2017). As such, municipal law enforcement officers are akin to police auxiliaries in Britain and elsewhere, who undertake street patrols and apply a problem-solving approach to crime and disorder.

The 'tough on crime' policies of the Dutch national government as described above, correspond with a slow but sure retreat of traditional community policing philosophies. Although the overall police budget has risen substantially since 1993, neighborhood-bound policing, in relative terms, failed to gain a sizeable financial boost (Haagsma *et al.* 2012). As an outcome of this, the popular call for 'more blue on the street' seems to have resulted in 'more "light blue" on the street': what we now increasingly observe is the incorporation of '(not-too-distant) cousins' (Johnston, 2003: 199) such as municipal law enforcement officers, private security guards, and street coaches within community policing. This development has led to the crafting of local safety programs, each with a distinct *couleur locale*. As already pointed out, such programs do not necessarily involve policing bodies alone. The welfare, housing, educational and social work also have a major presence. The governance of these local networks is therefore likely to be quite 'muddy and messy' in practice (Lindblom, 1959). In fact, integral safety is itself an outcome of multifaceted and commonly indefinite

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'improvizational' processes. The next section, on the implementation of the Flying Squads in Amsterdam, serves as an empirical illustration of these processes.

Flying Squads

In recent years, inspired by public safety policies in the United Kingdom (see e.g. Crawford, 2009), behavioral regulation has become a major concern in a variety of Dutch local policy fields, including public safety and urban regeneration. The invention of the Flying Squads in Amsterdam fits in with such developments. Two important goals of Flying Squads are (a) to tackle problems caused by, among others, homeless people and troublesome youth by imposing fixed penalties upon them; and (b) to offer such disorderly individuals medical care if necessary. The squads are restricted to small areas, mostly 'hot spots' in Amsterdam, with the goal of improving the 'quality of life' there – rendering the areas 'clean, intact and safe'. Nevertheless, in practice, the intended convergence of 'hard' and 'soft' strategies has encountered more obstacles than was first envisaged. The explanation of why this is the case reveals the aspirations and pitfalls involved in deploying Flying Squads to bridge the welfare and policing sectors.

A phased toolkit

The central idea behind the Flying Squads involves restoring public order, and creating what Shearing et al. (2008) term a 'nexus' by mobilizing a host of organizations to build sustainable public safety. 'Nexus' is Latin for 'linking' or 'binding' together, in this case linking together the knowledge, tools and expertise owned by municipal law enforcers, police constables and street corner workers (a type of social worker). Those networked arrangements have a variety of characteristics in common: the organizations engaged are part of, but may also operate beyond the state; all actors involved are engaged in interdependent relationships; and public authorities attempt to get things done by using instruments and tools to (indirectly) steer or guide collaboration and harmonization (cf. Wood & Shearing, 2007). As a result, the nexus metaphor is more about negotiation and consensus aimed at influencing the 'flow of events' (Parker & Braithwaite, 2003: 119) than it is about the use of blunt sovereign power.

The Flying Squads represent a policy instrument (i.e. a 'phased toolkit'; Van Steden & Stekelenburg, 2010), which consists, on paper at least, of the following four steps. The starting point of the squads' concern is the identification of severe disorder and petty crime in Amsterdam's neighborhoods. On a policy-level, problems are identified through consultation between the City Administration (*Bestuursdienst*), the Housing and Social Support Department (*Dienst Wonen Zorg en Samenleving*), the Public Health Department, the Central Police Unit, and the City Street Patrol Department (*Dienst Stadstoezicht*). This process is informed by quantitative data derived from the Department of Research, Information and Statistics (*Dienst Onderzoek Informatie en Statistiek*) taken together with hands-on knowledge supplied by professionals in the field. It is important to note that the identification of disorder problems and the subsequent actions taken are not completely determined from a

police point of view, but result from agreement among the partners running the squads. As Shearing and Marks write:

the police recognize that while they are an agency that is responsible for and accountable for ensuring safety outcomes, they are not necessarily the agency that is best placed to generate these outcomes across all contexts (2011: 213).

In the current example, municipal law enforcers are primarily responsible for making the first contact with people causing trouble.

The second step is to restore order and provide assistance to the local community. In so doing, municipal law enforcers may impose on-the-spot penalties on rowdy drinkers and panhandlers, but more subtle forms of re-establishing community safety are also possible. Indeed, the Flying Squads' goal of combining harder-edged policing tactics with caring approaches translates into a 'carrot' and 'stick' model (cf. Ayres & Braithwaite 1992). By using the 'soft power' of street corner workers who try to convince people such as drug addicts to visit a doctor or a rehabilitation center, the squads typically direct their interventions at the base of the enforcement pyramid. If a gentle approach – what Braithwaite (1997) terms 'speaking softly' – fails, then municipal enforcement officers, who carry a 'small stick' in the form of fines for people breaching public norms, can escalate matters. While taking these various actions, the squads are able to build up dossiers outlining the lower-level activities they have undertaken, and these dossiers enable them to escalate matters to the top of the pyramid, eventually leading to police constables, who have the power to arrest offenders, being mobilized within the squads – Braithwaite's 'big stick'.

Third, ideally the Flying Squads should conduct additional research to gather background information about the factors causing or underlying nuisance and disorder problems in certain Amsterdam 'hot spots'. This may be done by identifying and selecting all kinds of plausible risks at the neighborhood level. An awareness of risk factors such as poor housing, school drop-outs and the availability of addictive substances, is arguably helpful in countering problems of neighborhood deterioration (cf. Van Steden et al. 2013). Furthermore, municipal patrols, street corner workers and police constables seek to track the personal lives and habits of regular offenders. For instance, are they on drugs or alcohol? Do they frequently see a counselor or a doctor? Do they earn an income or visit day care? Detailing such biographies can lead to the recruitment of organizations other than law enforcement agencies in handling problematic situations. Since problems in the social, medical and psychological spheres often matter most, many third parties, including municipal departments, housing associations, youth and community services, street coaches, home helpers, mental care, health care and schools come into view. These parties can be called upon to accompany people at

risk, build up (professional) support groups around them, and forestall future derailment by engaging in protective or proactive measures.

Finally, once agreement on the safety issue has been reached, the Flying Squads try to 'map out' (Dupont, 2004) relevant people and organizations, and institute mutual associations between them. Since disorderly behavior is usually understood in relation to well-being and (mental) health issues, the squads have been conceived of as 'bridging the gap' between reactive law enforcement and preventative welfare work. In this manner, the last stage of assessing and strengthening links between the world of policing on the one hand, and the world of welfare and care on the other, feeds into an evaluative loop that specifies themes that require more attention. This is necessary because of the complicated relationships and resistance within the labyrinth of agents and agencies present in Amsterdam. Public authorities face huge difficulties reconciling the conflicting interests and working methods found within the spaghetti-like tangle of organizational echelons, which hampers genuinely *integral* public safety programs. The following section sheds more light on the recalcitrant reality of crafting workable partnerships at the local level.

Integral safety in action

While reviewing the Flying Squad as a policy instrument, academics and practitioners worked closely together. This evaluative research has been conducted under the banner of the former Frans Denkers research group on Safety, Security and Citizenship (chaired by Hans Boutellier), which is facilitated by the Dutch police, the municipality of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam. This allowed for a mild variant of 'participatory action research' ensuring

a mechanism for practitioners and academics to open themselves to real dialogue, to interpersonal conflict, and to struggling (personally and professionally) to achieve shared outcomes (Marks et al., 2009: 114).

Over the course of our evaluative fieldwork, professionals working for the municipality and the police assisted us in selecting three sites for study, contributed to honing the research questions, attended meetings to reflect on findings, and were responsive to insights from scholarly writings on plural policing and community safety governance around the globe. Moreover, by describing and critically examining the *raison d'être* behind the Flying Squads, both researchers and practitioners reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of this instrument. Such endeavors resulted in an evaluation of the Flying Squads' phased toolkit, outlined above, and a jointly supported research report.

We undertook our site studies in the 'red light district' (the famous prostitution zone) of downtown Amsterdam as well as in the Western (the Geuzenveld borough) and the Eastern (the Transvaal borough) areas of the city. The research draws on 17 formal interviews with respondents related to the squads (municipal law enforcement, health care, social work, and police professionals) and the participatory observations of street patrols undertaken by the municipal law enforcement officers (De Groot & Van Steden, 2011). Findings on the squads' goals, working practices, collaborative efforts, and outcomes are explored briefly below.

According to the municipal law enforcers interviewed, from the outset the Flying Squads lacked a clear goal. Respondents referred to ambiguous notions of 'tackling incivilities' and, more aggressively, 'reconquering the streets' from disorderly people, which guided their initial ambitions. Over time, however, municipal law enforcers began to focus on substance-related offences, ranging from drug use and drug dealing to 'binge drinking' and public drunkenness, youth nuisance, shop raids, and overt illegal gambling. In so doing, these enforcers came to appreciate their pivotal role in strengthening the police's information position and enhancing citizens' feelings of safety.

This narrowing down of the squads' problem orientation indicated a gradual evolution in their daily working practices. While municipal law enforcement officers demonstrated a strong appetite for harsh interventions, the police maneuvered them in the direction of 'keeping an eye on public spaces' and 'creating a pleasant living environment'. Even though municipal law enforcers do sometimes fine people for low-level offences, most of their time is consumed with preventive and service-oriented activities, not repressive ones. For instance, the police asked them to be alert to shop raids during both opening and closing hours (Geuzenveld borough), and to warn tourists against the buying and selling of 'fake dope' in the red light district. In addition, municipal law enforcers were being utilized to reinforce contacts with citizens and communities as a means of constructing social networks and gathering information about such neighborhood issues as illegal drug and gambling houses (Transvaal borough). Their work is now very much dedicated to delivering 'public reassurance' (Innes, 2004) through uniformed patrols.

In an age that is preoccupied with crime control imperatives, prioritizing auxiliary policing engagement in the direction of fostering local capacity building and of incorporating neighborhood intelligence may be a hopeful development. On the surface, this development recreates the image of municipal law enforcement officers as an extension of communities, not of police authorities. Yet things seem more complicated than that. The strengthening of partnership links between municipal officers, and especially street corner workers, intended for the red light district and Transvaal borough, turned out to be burdensome. First, during our interviews, respondents from the welfare organization displayed a reluctance to go out on the streets with uniformed municipal patrollers. Street corner workers worried about undermining

their good contacts with hard-to-reach groups such as homeless people when they were seen to be openly co-operating with 'the strong arm of the law'. Second, they had different working hours from the municipal law enforcers. In consequence, both types of professionals barely saw each other on the streets, to the point that personal associations 'faded away' and 'died out'. Insofar as any information exchange existed among them, it was limited to analyzing daily reports and databases at the managerial level.

By comparison, the implementation of Flying Brigades into daily police routines went relatively smoothly. Police officers are now routinely positioned within the squads to identify and mobilize their closest partners. Nevertheless, in some instances the anticipated integration between municipal officers and their police colleagues failed to get off the ground. In those cases, apart from providing back-up in emergency situations, the police did barely more than organize (scarce) briefings for municipal law enforcement officers, sometimes in combination with private security guards and street corner workers. These briefings were designed to guide the municipal officers' patrols and to allow information exchange, but, in effect, they were of poor quality, as Flying Squads frequently wandered around without receiving proper police support. Another illuminating observation during our fieldwork was the lack of rapprochement between police constables and municipal law enforcers during lunch breaks. Police constables were skeptical of the municipal law enforcers, regarding themselves as the 'real coppers'. Thus, rather than being cooperative and close-knit, the squads might be better described as 'living apart together'. Municipal law enforcers still 'come across as strange bed fellows' (McCarthy, 2013: 269) in police circles.

Despite all of this, when outcomes and evaluations are examined, statistics show promising results for all three sites under investigation. Crime figures have declined in recent years ('objective index'), with citizens reporting increased feelings of safety and security ('subjective index'). According to the Department of Research, Information and Statistics, data in the three boroughs investigated revealed the following:

- Red Light District: the objective index dropped from 260 (2003) to 107 (2010) and the subjective index dropped from 168 to (2003) to 107 (2010);
- Transvaal borough: the objective index dropped from 89 (2003) to 75 (2010) and the subjective index dropped from 127 to (2003) to 99 (2010);
- Geuzenveld borough: the objective index dropped from 94 (2003) to 71 (2010) and the subjective index dropped from 114 to (2003) to 102 (2010).

As yet, it is tricky, if not impossible, to relate the trends outlined above to the implementation of Flying Squads *per se*. The city of Amsterdam is notorious for hosting an enormously composite bureaucratic field of projects and programs dedicated to crime control, disorder reduction and 'quality of life' (*leefbaarheid*). So instead of entering the minefield of causal

explanations, there might be more in the argument that the activation of new players crafting local community safety landscapes contributes to shaping 'reflective spaces' (Wood & Marks, 2007: 280) in which practitioners learn, and then strive for small and incremental (cultural) change. The Dutch police, who are confronted with many newcomers 'jockeying for position' (Wood, 2004: 36) in the governance of community safety, have been active in realigning themselves to the needs and sensibilities of various players – most prominently municipal law enforcers and street corner workers – albeit in a fairly haphazard, improvised fashion. In spite of this, though, conditions for change are continuously challenged when searching for novel modes of genuinely 'networked' partnership. Flying Squads have experienced, and continue to experience, difficulties with respect to trust, co-operation, and coordination among stakeholders.

Conclusion and lessons learned

Over the past few years, newly established networks of community safety governance have emerged in the Netherlands. These networks, in general, harbor the high hope of integral multi-agency collaboration at the local level. The process tries to reconcile the divergent logics of law enforcement (criminal justice, policing) on the one hand, and public health (welfare, care) on the hand. The case study on the Flying Squads in Amsterdam makes it clear that aspirations have been met only in part. The implementation of this policy instrument has certainly motivated the police, municipal law enforcers and street corner workers to facilitate combined, tailor-made operational activities. At the same time, uniting welfare and law enforcement rationalities is easier said than done. In particular, we found a lack of collaboration between municipal law enforcement officers and street corner workers. This may not come as a surprise since

[c]onflicts between policing and social justice have been notorious, as reflected by conflicting welfare and criminal justice discourses on the nature of homelessness [and other vulnerable people; RvS] (Baillergeau, 2014: 364).

A key explanation here is that 'nuisance policing' as embraced by municipal and traditional policing agencies runs counter to the logic of public health and welfare professionals who try to assist and recover marginalized people in a non-punitive manner.

In terms of lessons learned, the implantation of the Flying Squads in Amsterdam show that an overemphasis on bureaucratic approaches and technocratic blueprints – i.e., the assumption that a phased toolkit could encourage inter-agency cooperation – seriously hampers professional conduct. Political and policy preferences have insufficiently recognized the need for experimentation, mutual learning, and trust building between the police,

municipal law enforcers, and street corner workers at the grassroots level. Such notions of crafting partnership 'from below' – as opposed to 'top-down' hierarchical policy implementations – turn out to be crucial if integral safety and welfare programs are to function effectively (cf. Bannink et al 2013). Although rational modes of policy making cannot be dismissed entirely, in networked settings room should be left for the 'distinct' or 'localized' character of projects, and a stop put to 'one-size-fits-all' approaches.

In years to come, further extension of current schemes and pilot operations such as the Flying Squads will inevitably rest on the willingness and capacity of police constables, municipal law enforcers and social workers to work together more closely. On an optimistic reading, enthusiastic individual actors might show unforeseen 'seeding' potential, developing fresh ways to organize partnerships. As Wood & Bradley argue, networked actors inhibit the potential of adopting a 'new "thinking process" aimed at embedding the principles and practices of partnership building' (2009: 142) across the cultural and organizational dimensions of their institutions. A British study suggests that this transformation is actually taking place. For pragmatic reasons, police constables set aside their wariness of new colleagues in local safety networks, and even welcomed them as appreciated members of the team (O'Neill & McCarthy, 2014). In such a context, any tendency towards punitive objectives within integral safety policies will require constant critical scrutiny. In particular, future research should address the question of if, and how, vulnerable individuals such as homeless people and drug addicts may not only be excluded from the streets, but also supported to rebuild their lives once more.

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